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EPA's No. 2 visits Superfund site in Libby

Posted: Tuesday, Oct 27, 2009 - 01:46:05 pm MDT

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Brad Fuqua/The Western News
The EPA's Victor Ketellapper, from left, Mike Cirian and Mathy Stanislaus discuss Superfund issues on Thursday at the former export plant site in Libby.

By Canda Harbaugh, The Western News

The City-County Health Board meeting in Libby Thursday featured a top Environmental Protection Agency official that embraced the theme of increasing the EPA's transparency, accessibility and cooperation with the community.

Mathy Stanislaus, assistant administrator for the EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, took charge of the nation's Superfund sites after being confirmed to the position in June.

He took a tour of some of the site's operable units last week and participated in the meeting to get a feel for the community's concerns.

"I very much come from a perspective of communities having a strong role in the decisions of government," Stanislaus said. "I've really impressed on my staff that we provide access and transparency in a way that communities can participate effectively through all of the decisions that we make."

Allan Payne, an attorney helping the City of Libby through the Superfund process, complimented Stanislaus on his environmental justice work and one of his past speeches that emphasized community involvement.

"That's critical for this community," Payne said. "Those are uplifting words for us. Those are very powerful things and I know that there's substance behind those."

Though board members spoke in congenial tones, they described their frustration with the EPA and the Superfund process.

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Concerns included:

- Asbestos cleanup occurring before the results of toxicity studies.
- Toxicity studies using old science and not integrating childhood exposures.
- Institutional controls and the financial burden that could potentially be left with local government once the EPA declares the site clean.
- Bureaucracy and perceived political motivation dictating decisions.
- Distrust produced from the EPA not involving the community in the process.
- Challenges associated with the negative national attention stemming from the Libby area being a Superfund site.

"It was a good listening session for Mathy to hear the concerns directly from the community," said John Konzen, county commissioner and City-County Health Board chair. "I thought he listened and asked some good questions."

Brad Black, county health officer and physician at the Center for Asbestos Related Disease, asked how the EPA could implement Records of Decision and perform cleanups without knowing the risk level associated with Libby amphibole asbestos. The former screening plant and city-owned former export plant are scheduled to have RODs early next year.

"Certainly now as we're talking about moving from emergency removal to remediation, this is where we start setting standards of cleanup," Black said. "We've been talking about RODs, and yet in our mind, we're saying, 'Look, we don't have a baseline risk assessment - how in the world are we going to clean it up right?'"

Stanislaus said that toxicity studies will continue to be a priority, but in the meantime, the exposure path must be broken as soon as possible.

"In terms of the short-term stuff, what we want to do is prevent exposure," Stanislaus said. "... I look forward to hearing your comments on how do we make sure we prevent exposure, while also being clear that we have to move forward on the science."

Leroy Thom, vice president of CARD's board of directors, described his feeling that in the past few years the EPA has shut down community involvement. He said it appeared to be a decision made at the Region 8 Denver office or in Washington D.C. on a national level.


"I've seen a change in the attitude of EPA since it (Libby Superfund site) began," Thom said. "When it was first here, they were very accommodating, more than willing to go the extra step, were more than interested in getting it right than what I think is going on right now."

Stanislaus emphasized to the board and attendees to hold him and his office accountable and to reach him if there is a problem.

Lisa Jackson, administrator for the EPA, promised the U.S. Senate in January that upon confirmation to the agency's top position, she would visit the Libby Superfund site and consider declaring a public health emergency. She made the declaration in June and though she has not made the visit to Libby herself, sending Stanislaus was considered a show of commitment.

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